

## Article

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"Cartographic Explorations of Self in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* and Jacques Poulin's *Volkswagen Blues*"

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*International Journal of Canadian Studies / Revue internationale d'études canadiennes*, n° 38, 2008, p. 41-60.

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DOI: 10.7202/040806ar

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***Cartographic Explorations of Self in  
Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family  
and Jacques Poulin's Volkswagen Blues***

**Abstract**

*Shaped by both those who make and read them, maps generate a two-way transformative process whereby subjective imagination inscribes and re-inscribes place with meaning and, at the same time, prompts the subject to figure and re-configure portrayals of self as reflected in the charting of place. This enactment of the sociology of the map is particularly evident in Running in the Family by Michael Ondaatje and Volkswagen Blues by Jacques Poulin. Both texts provoke an awareness of the close connection between the representation of space and the process of mapping space on the one hand, and the intimate quest for personal and cultural identity on the other.*

**Resumé**

*Façonnées tant par ceux qui les dressent que par ceux qui les lisent, les cartes déclenchent un processus de transformation bidirectionnelle par lequel l'imagination subjective non seulement donne et redonne une signification au lieu, mais aussi invite le sujet à construire et reconstruire des représentations de soi dans la localisation du lieu. Cette mise en scène de la sociologie des cartes est marquante dans Un air de famille de Michael Ondaatje et Volkswagen Blues de Jacques Poulin. Les deux livres éveillent la conscience du lien étroit entre, d'une part, la représentation et la localisation de l'espace et, d'autre part, la recherche intime de l'identité personnelle et culturelle.*

## Public and Private Intersections

Cartography, we see, is never merely the drawing of maps: it is the making of worlds.

—J. B. Harley. "Cartography, Ethics and Social Theory"

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said argues that "none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography," a struggle not only about territory and ownership, "but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings" (7). Said, who engages in a geographical inquiry into the experience of empire and its relation to culture, especially narrative fiction and other forms of storytelling, draws a direct connection between the management of land and the land's people. For if imperialism extends beyond practices of territorial domination to include collective attitudes that not only fuel such practices, but also inform the culture of a people, then concerns over land spill into questions of identity. The systematic exchange between Europeans and the inhabitants of their colonies, for example, forged a sense of self as distinct from those thought to be others, hence revitalizing the division between "us" and "them" that Said traces back to ancient Greek thought about barbarians (xxv). Accordingly, the carving out of identity was never too far removed from the discovery (or invention) of foreign lands. Anchoring imperialism and its influence in intellectual, aesthetic, political, and other cultural energies within the continuum of history, Said contends that "[e]verything about human history is rooted in the earth" (7).

The coincidence of land and identity across time is nowhere more apparent than in the mapping of the colonized lands to which Said refers. Most theorists of colonialism who examine questions of power-knowledge as they intersect with geography agree that maps are a discourse that represents land through a veil of ideology. David Tracey sums up this position when he writes, "land is empty, apparently unintelligible until individuals anthropomorphically project [their own internal images] upon the face of the earth, so that the earth bears or carries [their] own face – a face determined by political, cultural and personal factors" (59). In particular, cartography, as theorists such as J. B. Harley and Graham Huggan (among others) have shown, operated effectively to acquire, manage, and reinforce colonial power. Alongside guns and wars, "maps have been the weapons of imperialism" and, apart from drafting, inventing, and disseminating knowledge of political or military exploits of defined colonies, they were powerful social tools that "could determine the lives and deaths of millions of people" (Harley, "Maps, Knowledge, and Power" 282 - 283). Maps held meaning in a social context, partaking in and justifying existing colonial discourses that impacted the lives and identities not only of the people whose lands were being claimed, but also

of those who staked out such claims. Although posing as and often passing for objective representations of land, maps actually exerted influence over people, from how they viewed the world to how the world viewed them to how they viewed themselves.

Svetlana Alpers also adheres to a sociological reading of maps. In her examination of maps as artistic images (and not exclusively scientific ones), Alpers suggests that geography and, by extension, the cartographic chartings it authorizes, embodies a socially constructed knowledge of land. In her words, “[w]hat maps present is not land possessed but land known in certain respects” (149). Since maps both write or model a geographic space into existence and also tell stories that are shaped by a given knowledge of the world, land is never free from the socio-cultural forces that shape it into a structured, meaningful territory. Denis Wood is also of the opinion that maps necessarily offer up knowledge of the world from which they emerge. He theorizes a “*sociology of the map*” to emphasize that “the knowledge [a map] embodies is socially *constructed*, not tripped over and no more than ... *reproduced*” (italics in original, 18). Wood, like Alpers, does not dismiss the map’s appeal to reality, an appeal rendered particularly strong by its adherence to mimetic models of representation (see Huggan, “Decolonizing the Map” 116). Instead, he argues that the reality the map addresses is one that has been framed and thus crafted by a particular vision of the world, a vision designed to empower the map-makers. It is the easy correlation between the map’s appeal to reality and notions of objectivity, accuracy, transparency, and neutrality – notions that have guided the understanding of maps for centuries – that Wood contests. By exposing maps as social constructs that “necessarily embody their author’s prejudices, biases and partialities (not to mention the less frequently observed art, curiosity, elegance, focus, care, imagination, attention, intelligence and scholarship their makers bring to their labor)” (24), Wood posits the map as a carefully crafted story that conveys knowledge of both the land charted and the cartographer who did the charting. The map is, to borrow from Phillip Muehrcke, a “controlled fiction” (103). Just as maps chart land into existence, they also chart an author into existence for a story is nothing if not a motivated telling.<sup>1</sup>

Once maps are understood to be narratives conditioned by the cartographer’s agency, it becomes possible to see in them the pictorial marks of the author’s identity. Since the charting of land is never free from the cartographer’s personal sense of self, a sense of self that draws from and spills into the moment of inscription, it is across the stories maps tell, the versions of the world they present, that knowledge of an authorial self is betrayed. Wendy Roy notes that several map-makers inscribe their selves on the landscape they chart by “naming geographical features such as lakes in their honour” (14). Naming or, better, renaming land is only one

among many deliberate acts of cartographic self inscription.<sup>2</sup> Others include the manipulation – from concealment to abstraction, omission to falsification – of geographical knowledge as well as the highlighting of certain geographical features to the detriment of others.<sup>3</sup> These and other examples of geographical discourse that factor into the map's production can be probed as articulations of an authored self.<sup>4</sup>

When the mark of location extends beyond geographical objectivity to include human dimensions – social, cultural, political dimensions – maps break away from the epistemological confines of spatial accuracy to accommodate the subjective. Critics have argued that cartography, perhaps more than any other geographic enterprise, pushes land into meaning through authorial acts of personal intervention as well as personal inscription. These acts, however, are not confined to the map-making process; maps are meaningful and powerful social technologies also because they engage the reader's imagination, social preconceptions, and personal sense of self. What needs to be equally stressed is that just as the map's narrative extends beyond the land to the map-maker's self, so too does it extend to the reader's self. Indeed, the operative function of the personal is often so pervasive that it inspires readers to look for traces of their own selves on the map's surface and, hence, to *enact* the sociology of the map. Readers thus effectuate, on a personal level, the notion that space is empty, apparently unintelligible until they project their own internal images upon it. This enactment extends the socially constructed knowledge that went into the map's making to its reading as well.

### **Cartographic Formations of Self**

We are sitting here, you and I,  
in a place on a map.  
We know this.  
Yet we are not on the map.

We are looking for ourselves.  
This is the rustle of leaves  
that you hear,  
the crackle of folding paper,  
the sound of old maps.

Howard McCord, "Listening to Maps"

Howard McCord's poetic nod toward the exploration of self prompted by the map's narrativity – in them "[w]e are looking for ourselves" – provides a provocative lead into the examination of the map's role in the

exploration of its reader's sense of self. It suggests a shift away from the map's structuring process, with its focus on the cartographic inscription of an authorial self (whether personal or collective), to acknowledge instead the map as a mediated exchange with readers. As suggested in the poem, the full potential of this narrative exchange is realized when readers are seduced by the map into an autobiographical reading.<sup>5</sup> Maps urge readers by "the crackle of folding paper" to step into their narrative universe. In so doing, they bring readers to occupy a space between the map and their own selves – readers are at once "in a place on the map" and "not on the map." In this respect, maps yield a narrative interaction that is not only geographical, socio-political, or biographical in nature, but that extends into the autobiographical as well.

Cartography's narrative potential or strength characterizes the use of maps in literature. It is not necessarily the map's authoritative claim to a visibly verifiable reality that makes it particularly attractive to writers of literature, especially postcolonial writers; instead, the map's strongest appeal resides in its subtle inscription of identity that solicits the workings of human intervention. Characterizing writers as belonging to a special group of map users, special because of their "imaginative and philosophical perspective on the subject of maps," Phillip C. Muehrcke and Juliana O. Muehrcke suggest that maps are often incorporated into literature because they stimulate the reader's imagination, fostering an understanding of the map that "depends upon how many facets of himself [the reader] brings to [it]" (317, 325). Although the authors posit the primary role of the reader's imagination as that of drawing a link between the map and the real world (and not that of drawing a link between the map and their own understanding of self), they do reach the provocative conclusion that since maps are controlled abstractions that need to be read, "each person sees what he wants to see in them" (331). Empirical verifiability thus gives way to the self-involved vagaries of reading; hence, it is narrativity that affords maps their seductive power.<sup>6</sup>

In much postcolonial literature, especially in texts that examine how colonial history affects personal identity, maps prompt a seeing of a particular sort, one characterized by an interpretation of self as it overlaps with the inscription of land. *Volkswagen Blues* by Jacques Poulin and *Running in the Family* by Michael Ondaatje, for example, confirm the map's participation in the understanding of identity.<sup>7</sup> In both of these hybrid texts about the search for personal and cultural identity, readers of maps see their own faces on a map's surface. The inclusion of an introductory map coupled with extensive commentary on the manipulative processes of cartographic inscription and the indeterminacy of cartographic interpretation provokes an exploration into how the map reader's identity is negotiated within and across the map's lines.<sup>8</sup> In both texts,

readers of maps see in them – in the use of language, the selection of place names, and the map's changing topography – traces of their own selves. Cartographic representations of land, in other words, prompt an autobiographical reading that ultimately informs configurations of self.

The seductive autobiographical lure of maps is strongly suggested in *Volkswagen Blues* as Jack Waterman and his new acquaintance, La Grande Sauterelle examine two large, beautiful maps on display in the Gaspé museum. Displayed side by side, both are maps of North America. One delineates the vast territory claimed by France in the mid-eighteenth century; the other, North America before the arrival of European settlers (20). Jack, who is French-Canadian, recognizes the place names of the first map and is utterly impressed by the vastness of the territory that was under French rule. He is much less interested in and less familiar with a large part of the Native American tribal names that mark out land on the second map. In contrast, his travel companion, who describes herself as neither fully Native American nor white (223), is drawn teary-eyed to the names and territorial divisions that reflect the history of Native Americans. Such discriminatory reading practices betray the private negotiation of geographical space, historical connection, and private identity that guides the understanding of maps. Each reader sees in the map reflected a crucial component of their own personal history, thus positioning themselves as both observer and participant in the particular historical reality the map inscribes.

Faced with very different maps of the same place, each map reader imbues the map with their cultural histories, histories that are necessarily nestled in personal identity. Anthony Purdy, who examines the intersection of maps and memory in the work of three Canadian authors, proposes that the maps in *Volkswagen Blues* work alongside similar extratextual referential material to weave in a short space an elaborate network of relations between personal and cultural memory. He argues that when examining the large maps on the museum wall, both Jack and La Grande Sauterelle bring to them a complex "set of conflicting cultural memories of colonial conquest" that include the "French *mission civilisatrice*" and the "genocide of Aboriginal peoples" (270). Pierre L'Hérault also draws attention to the conflicted relationship Jack and La Grande Sauterelle have toward North America.<sup>9</sup> He describes their understanding of North America and their place within it as being at once tainted by forgetting and remembering, imagination and reality, loss and possession, the known and the unknown (28). Emphasizing that both characters continually negotiate between the past and the present, L'Hérault concludes that objectively speaking, the maps and the space they chart are similar; subjectively, they drastically differ (30). Although of the same place, the personal workings of each reader situate the map's meaning in the subjec-

tive realm. Through their reading, these maps are free to evoke rather than represent. As narratives, they seduce readers on a journey of private wandering across personal interpretation.<sup>10</sup>

Cartography has been widely theorized with a focus on the way in which changing borders and names trace out its role in imposing an order onto and establishing power over existing lands and territories. Graham Clarke, for instance, argues that what can be seen by way of a comparison of eighteenth-century American maps is the extent to which the map "was from the first used by the competing European colonial powers as a text of ownership and control, as well as of information and accurate (often inaccurate) knowledge about the continent" (456). Although he refers to the double epistemological thrust of mapping, Clarke abandons this line of reasoning to theorize the map as a way to claim land. Bill Ashcroft also exposes colonial map-making practices as an effective means of establishing possession of land, and specifies that boundaries, in particular, "are critical in the colonial taming of the wild and the control of space" (162). What must be emphasized is that cartographic claims to territorial ownership (with the full implication of a visual creation of land) are necessarily intertwined with telling information (both spatial and cultural) of literal, existent, authentic individuals. Mapping out a territory is a process of narration, an act of imagination that mirrors, shapes, and even violates not only land, but identities as well.

### **Slipping between Fact and Fiction**

A map may lie, but it never jokes.

Howard McCord, "Listening to Maps"

Since land is structured according to the map-maker's language and values, "beliefs and theories, expectations and prejudices" (Novitz 113), maps that chart a land into existence necessarily chart an identity into existence. In Poulin's *Volkswagen Blues* as in Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, the comparison of two or more maps that purport to be of the same place enables readers to confront the authorial interest that unfailingly directs the execution of every map. In both texts, critical engagement with a changing topography casts into question the map's authority as a faithful, objective recording of the world. The meaningful differences between the maps as well as the characters' reaction to those differences expose maps as narratives tainted by the author's own ideologies. The possibility of rash belief on the part of map readers is, in fact, destroyed through a comparative process that alerts them to the ways in which every map is a fabricated representation. As Wood observes, exposure to the



workings of the map's author forces the realization that maps are no "more than a *version* of the world, [...] a *story* about it [...] a *fiction*" (70).

In *Running in the Family*, a chapter section called "Tabula Asiae" is fully devoted to the critique of cartographic accuracy. Referring to the "[o]ld portraits of Ceylon" that hang on his brother's wall as "false maps," the narrator discredits any direct, transparent relation to the real they may appear to have (63). Just as the island's name keeps changing with each colonial succession – "Serendip, Ratnapida ('island of gems'), Taprobane, Zeloan, Aeilan, Seyllan, Ceilon, and Ceylon" (64) – so too does its shape.<sup>11</sup> Taken together, the maps trace the island as though it had no definite physical shape: "The shapes differ so much they seem to be translations by Ptolemy, Mercator, François Valentyn, Mortier, and Heydt – growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy" (63). Although of the same island, the maps are seeped in the writing and the conceptions of each colonial successor so much so that they are translations, fashioned narratives that ultimately represent distinct, quasi unrelated places.<sup>12</sup> Every map that comprises, constitutes, and legitimizes Ceylon's history writes a new, provisional representation and knowledge of the island into existence. The narrator's critical observations when faced with the different cartographic models of Ceylon that adorn his brother's Toronto wall show that "new dispensations make new knowledge, displacing former facts, the new knowledge itself destined to be succeeded" (Giltrow and Stouck 168).

In addition to showing that the island's shape and, by extension, definition, is under constant revision, the maps that make up this cartographic genealogy of sorts also afford evidence that geographical place itself "is a series of erasures and overwritings which have transformed the world" (Rabasa qtd. in Ashcroft 132).<sup>13</sup> Drawing a parallel between Ondaatje's narrative and the cartographic reflections included in its pages, Rocio Davis proposes that the maps hover "between validated facts and necessary fictions" so that the history they relate "becomes both a process and a product, a lived experience for both the reader and writer" (271). Davis' passing observation that the maps, with their changing names and shape, engage readers in a lived experience demands further attention. When contemplated side-by-side, the maps of Ceylon are exposed as narratives that invite the imaginative intervention of readers. Once revealed as engaging in storytelling practices, maps shed their appeal to objectivity and revel in the subjective. In short, they demand to be read.

Ondaatje's narrator, who actively engages in the reading of maps, unmasks them as partaking in a process of mystification that transformed them from the narratives that they are into universal truths. Evincing the

allusive and elusive meaning of maps, the narrator admits that cartographic accuracy does not correspond to the geographical place as it is. Instead, it continually crosses between the real and the fictional, so that the map's meaning, as the narrator puts it, coincides with "the island as we know it" (63) – that is, with the island as each reader knows it. While studying the maps that so openly chart a multiplicity of tenuous and heterogeneous island shapes, the narrator is forced to instate cartographic truth as a "rumour of topography" (64). As in Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, here too the map's veracity is exposed as embedded in rumour because "connected with reality and invention, with truth and misunderstandings, or errors, or lies" (Comellini 347-348).<sup>14</sup> In his method of examination as well as in his conclusion that it is not so much changes in map-making techniques, but rather changes in the traditions and ideologies informing map-makers and readers alike that make of the maps fictional representations of the island, Ondaatje's narrator is like Roland Barthes who sees "Nature and History confused at every turn" (11).<sup>15</sup>

What the comparative exercise makes apparent is that maps transform the actual into the plausible and the desired, in short, into the poetic, through the very act of interpretation that makes of them narrative. As narrative, maps extend beyond the factual to incorporate the imaginative into their authenticating apparatus. Just as Ondaatje's narrator recognizes the maps hanging on his brother's wall to be "old portraits of Ceylon" (63), Poulin's characters are certain that both maps hanging in the museum are of the North American continent. The similarities between the maps dispel any doubt that they may be charting unreal, nonexistent, or unrecognizable places. But, in both instances, the maps also betray meaningful differences, differences that speak to the map as a product of the imagination.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the narrative process that renders the map's documentary certainty suspect actually authorizes the intimate association between land and identity. If to narrate place, it is necessary to forge a land founded equally on a physical geographic reality on the one hand, and, on the other hand, on imagination, then a sense of self necessarily filters into and out of cartographic chartings and readings. When the mapping out of a territory is understood to be an act of narration and, by extension, imagination, the workings of identity that seep into the map's very fabric rise to the surface to be met by the reader's imaginative workings. It follows that not only does the cartographic process shape identity (Zoppi 216), but so too does the reader's identity shape the map itself.

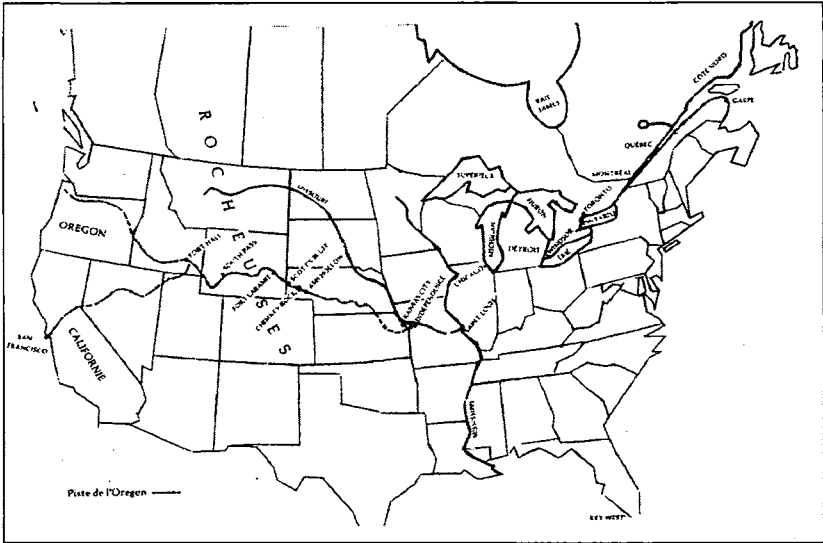
## Mapping Collective Topographies

There is no way to satirize a map.  
It keeps telling you where you are.  
And if you're not there,  
you're lost. Everything is reduced  
to meaning.

Howard McCord, "Listening to Maps"

Maps generate a two-way transformative process whereby subjective imagination (re-)inscribes land with meaning and, at the same time, prompts the (re-)configuration of self as reflected in the charting of land. Born from and rendered intelligible by way of a complex web of charting and reading and questioning, maps authorize the very readers that author them into existence. If to map land is to reconstruct by means of selection and interpretation and if to read mapped land is to engage in private wanderings across signs and symbols, then beside territorial boundaries, maps record cultural boundaries that reflect a sense of historically fluctuating communal and private spaces. As geography theorist Paul Carter specifies, "[b]y the act of place-naming, space is transformed symbolically into a place, that is, a space with a history. And, by the same token, the namer inscribes his passage permanently on the world, making a metaphorical word-place which others may one day inhabit and by which, in the meantime, he asserts his own place in history" (xxiv). In *Running in the Family* and *Volkswagen Blues*, map readers inhabit a place on the map. Like the map-makers before them, they too inscribe traces of themselves onto the map.

The map reproduced on the frontispiece of *Volkswagen Blues* is relatively bare, detailing only some of the places encountered by Jack Waterman and La Grande Sauterelle as they journey from Gaspé to San Francisco in search of Jack's estranged brother Théo. Particularly arresting is the dark line that runs across the length of the continent, for it marks out the route taken by the two travellers. Its starkness, accentuated by the fact that little else is indicated on the map (Canada and the United States of America are not named, nor is the border separating the two countries clearly delineated), consolidates its role as a demarcator of a private experience (Figure 1). Taking note of the "overwhelming blankness of most of the map," Adam Paul Weisman contends that it "gives it an unexplored, pre-national feel" (486). The introductory map is certainly at once restrictive and selective about what geographical details it charts, but it is so in order to better draw forth Jack and La Grande Sauterelle's personal inscription. In this sense, the exploration it charts is a private one.<sup>17</sup>



*Figure 1. Introductory Map, Volkswagen Blues*

Among the map's most striking features is the bringing together of Canada's two official languages to delineate selected topographical details and locations. Indeed, the blending of languages is so seamless, where some place names and geographic features are named in English and others in French, that "it is not immediately clear what linguistic logic is being used" (Weisman 486). If the scanty legend in the left hand corner that reads "Piste de l'Oregon ——" (n.p.) is to guide the map's reading, then French is its principal language. English, however, is used along the Oregon Trail to name prominent landmarks, such as Scott's Bluff, Ash Hollow, Fort Hill and Chimney Rock, that helped the 250,000 to 400,000 people who travelled along the trail during the Great Migrations (1843, 1846, 1849-50) gauge the distance covered in their westward travels. The use of English along the Oregon Trail to delineate geographical formations that seem to carry less import, despite their greater number, than the few city or state names sparsely scattered along the map reflects a particular historical reality when French-Canadian and American migrants joined others who set out to discover the West. Together, the group followed a path that was already traced out by English settlers. By following the same trail, Jack and La Grande Sauterelle take possession of, or situate themselves within, a heritage whose grandeur they record (Piccione 122). They claim the mapped land as their own, stepping into the map and allowing it to author them into existence. The trail, with its English names, is meaningful both historically and geographically not only for those who travelled along it during the Great Migrations (Morency 216), but also for the two travel companions. The map is significant, because the historically meaningful union of the two languages

partakes in the sort of “symbolic erasure of cultural difference” that David Leahy sees occurring throughout Poulin’s text. The particular arrangement of two languages on the introductory map speaks to a communal sense of identity that surpasses historical and geographic boundaries.<sup>18</sup>

The reading of maps within Poulin’s narrative also points to ways in which the two map readers inhabit a place on the map. Before beginning their transcontinental journey, Jack and La Grande Sauterelle visit a museum library in Gaspé. There, they discover that Théo, who had visited the same library, had signed out a book and indicated in the museum records that he lived in Saint Louis, Missouri. When contemplating why Théo would live in Saint Louis and not a grander city like New York, La Grande Sauterelle locates a map of the United States and pencils in what the narrator describes as the most evident route from Gaspé to Saint Louis (26). Both she and Jack see reflected in her markings the first French explorations of the continent, a discovery that brings Jack to relate tales about the first explorers of New France. At this point, however, their different relation to the charted land and its history is accentuated as La Grande Sauterelle grows silent and obstinate. The map, which originally prompted them to see in it a shared history, gives way to highly personal readings. In other words, as each reader engages more intensely in the map’s reading, they inscribe their own stories and their own selves deeper and deeper into its markings.

A different principle governs the use of two languages in the untitled map of Ceylon reproduced at the beginning of *Running in the Family* (Figure 2). Inclusion is not the primary objective informing its linguistic pairing. Instead, the cartographic union of English and an Indic language, when considered in relation to Ondaatje’s narrative, reveals an ongoing engagement with the transcription and translation of colonial power. The exclusion of village names referred to in the narrative as being inhabited by indigenous peoples (such as Wattala, Kalutara, Usetakeiyawa and Pelmadulla) indicates that these places and their peoples are not part of this “official” map. In its gesture of exclusion – a discriminatory gesture that openly betrays the hierarchization of land and people – the map narrates a story that differs in scope from that of the verbal narrative. Whereas Ondaatje’s narrator is writing the story of a family that is part of a country where “everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in them going back many generations” (41), the map does not openly speak to cultural mixing, despite its use of *Ganga* unaccompanied by the English *river* and *Sigiriya* instead of the anglicized spelling *Sigiri*. These two instances of linguistic digression show that Ceylon’s indigenous peoples and their history do indeed exist within its confines, but by way of their *being* linguistic transgressions

(and not the norm) they also show that the map partakes in or, at the very least, echoes the exclusionary cartographic practices so harshly critiqued by Ondaatje's narrator – that is, the practices of those who write from a privileged position of power. Although the map (like the narrative) is marked by what Said calls contrapuntal energies – a “simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (51) – it does not mark out a space for the indigenous people of Ceylon.

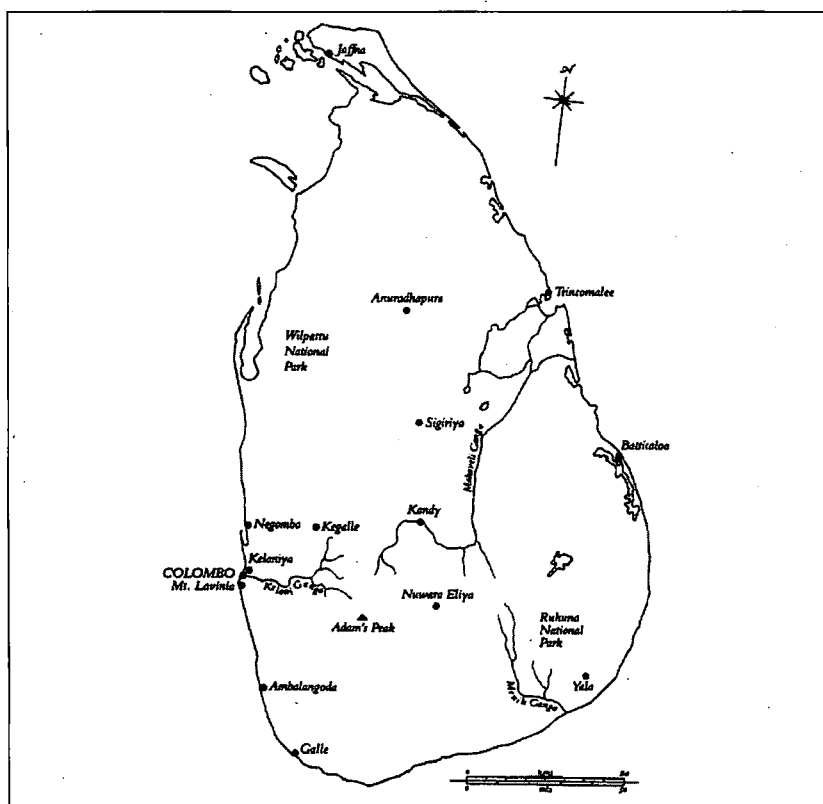


Figure 2. Introductory map, *Running in the Family*

Here, the introductory map, with its dominant use of English, charts out a space where unofficial history discreetly, almost silently filters into the official, but only as a reminder that the renaming of an already inhabited place is ultimately an act of appropriation, possession, and conquest.<sup>19</sup> As suggested in one of the two epigraphs accompanying the map, English is the language that has historically been associated with knowledge and power, whereas the traditional languages of India intimate an inhibition. In one epigraph, Douglas Amarasekera of the *Ceylon*

*Sunday Times* reports that "Americans were able to put a man on the moon because they knew English. The Sinhalese and Tamils whose knowledge of English was poor, thought that the earth was flat" (n.p). English, here, is posited as the language of unimaginable conquest and dominion. It towers over the Sinhalese and Tamils, dominating those who are excluded from its mastery. The introductory map of Ceylon mirrors this domination; only the places that are not inhabited by people, namely rivers and the fortified ancient city and palace Sigiriya (c. 459 AD), escape English labelling. The map's subscription to such a pointed discriminating practice of naming indicates that the cartographic naming of place extends beyond what Carter calls "spatial punctuation." Not only is space transformed "into an object of knowledge [...] that [can] be explored and read" (67), so too are people. In *Running in the Family*, the hierarchization of space operative within the map's nomenclature references the management and reinforcement of colonial governance over both land and people. In this sense, the map reflects a historical reality in which the narrator's family partook.

As in *Volkswagen Blues*, the use of two languages positions and defines identity in relation to space; but, in Ondaatje's narrative, the history mapped out is one of exclusion and effacement, not inclusion. In *Running in the Family*, the map narrates a tale of conquest and exploitation in which both land and people were dominated and expropriated by those who spoke English. The map does not deny the presence of indigenous peoples in this region, as is often apparent in the naming practices adopted throughout the colonial cartographic enterprise (see Renger 95). Instead, it inscribes the indigenous people only to record how they have been overwritten and, hence, silenced from history by their invaders. Unlike the written narrative where an attempt is made to inscribe the indigenous culture through historical recuperation (Barbour 60-85), the introductory map speaks to effacement.<sup>20</sup>

### **Cartographic Investigations of Self**

In *Running in the Family* and *Volkswagen Blues*, maps implicitly convey a tale of the exploration, management, and exploitation of land and, remarkably, identity. Ondaatje's text, as Ajay Heble specifies, is marked by "complex levels of interaction between place, politics, collective identity, and subjectivity" ("Rumours of Topography" 191). Anne Marie Miraglia emphasizes an equally compelling association between identity on the one hand and geographical, historical, cultural, and literary phenomena on the other in Poulin's *Volkswagen Blues* (121). Nowhere is this complex relationship between land and identity more pointed than in the extended cartographic investigations that characterize both texts.

Observation and scrutiny, facile recognition and critical questioning, lay forth the relationship between place and self as one where the concrete realities of geography intersect with the allusive meanderings of private identity as well as the discriminating affirmations of collective identities.

Beyond all recording and decoding, maps partake in a process of cultural inscription and, hence, offer a unique opportunity for contemplating self. By accentuating the ways in which maps are governed at once by the personal and the collective, the mythical and the truthful, *Running in the Family* and *Volkswagen Blues* complicate the quest for identity informing much travel writing. The juxtaposition of maps and a sustained critical commentary concerning cartographic reference in these literary texts prompts readers to look beyond the map as that which enhances or authenticates the narrative's geographic references. In both cases, the introductory map and many of those described throughout the narrative do not provide immediate access to a described reality. Instead, they prove to be narratives at once generating stories and absorbing the stories others bring to them. It follows that beyond space, maps chart a collective topography comprised of all the intelligible, but not necessarily real, human experiences that invest them with meaning.

## Notes

1. Tellingly, in classical antiquity, geography (like history) was born as a tale and understood as a literary genre belonging to fiction. For a survey of geographical thought in antiquity, see Romm.
2. For a discussion on how naming asserts the cartographer's place in history, see Carter (xxiv).
3. See Harley who examines the manipulation of geographical knowledge as authorized by the state or its ruler ("Silences and Secrecy" 59-65).
4. Although it is difficult to identify the authors of many of the maps dating to the early stages of colonization, especially those charting Canada or Australia, it is nonetheless possible to see in them the workings of a colonial discourse that speaks to an imperial collective or communal identity.
5. My understanding of narrative as transaction that seduces readers is indebted to the work of Ross Chambers (see esp. 3-17).
6. Cf. Vivan who argues, "The map is part and parcel of the game of representation and as such it may skip the reader's attention, in a way not dissimilar from that of narrative discourse" (50). Christopher Salter and William Lloyd make a similar observation in relation to the role of landscape in literature (2).
7. The intersection between public inscriptions of land and chartings of personal territories has been identified by some as a recurrent feature of contemporary Canadian writing. As early as 1971, Frye argues that in the Canadian context the question "Who am I?" becomes "Where am I?" (220). Several decades later, Cavell specifies that the correlation between Canadian culture and place, "be it



- identified as 'landscape,' 'geography,' 'archipelago,' or 'North'" (76-77), is an assumption informing much Canadian theoretical discourse. For a book-length study of mapping strategies in Canadian writing, see Huggan's *Territorial Disputes*.
8. *Running in the Family*'s generic indeterminacy has been discussed by a number of critics. For a detailed overview of the critical discourse surrounding the question of genre in *Running in the Family*, see Kamboureli 79-81. For a discussion of Ondaatje's text as "developing a unique structure that carries it beyond the boundaries of the travel genre," see Russell (23). See Kliman for a discussion on Ondaatje's use of calculated subversive strategies and Carey for how his introduction of new structuring orders undoes the fallacy of representation. Theorists who have studied the association between space and identity in *Volkswagen Blues* include Hébert (131-138), L'Hérault (28-31) and Socken (61-74). Whereas these critics focus on the journey and how it intersects with identity, I propose to examine the ways in which the cartographic representation of land, in particular, informs and effects identity.
  9. See Hyman for a detailed discussion of how Jack and La Grande Sauterelle have conflicting personal histories, which leads them to tell contradictory stories that reflect incompatible systems of memory. See Marcotte who suggests that both characters experience North America as a series of fragments (16).
  10. Cf. Michaud who classifies maps in Poulin's narrative as trivia-literature (71) and Demers who deems them to be literal pieces of the real (33). Both theorists forgo the maps' narrative quality.
  11. It is worth noting that Ondaatje does not respect the chronological order of Ceylon's name changes. This may serve as a further indication that names, like charted land, tell stories (and not truths) of geography. For a general discussion concerning Ondaatje's approach to naming and its relation to identity, see Cook 8-9.
  12. The maps' defiance of a clear-cut presentation of fact leads Verhoeven to conclude that "[t]he Sri Lanka that is presented to us in *Running in the Family* is not so much a country on a map as a dream-vision" (194).
  13. Cf. Kanaganayakam who argues that in *Running in the Family* Ondaatje glosses over Sri Lanka's bloody history of conflict and conquest. What I suggest is that the narrator's critique of the island's cartographic history forcefully alludes to the island's history of invasion and conquest. A similar reading is proposed by Coleman (117-118).
  14. Adopting a postcolonial perspective, Huggan explains that the maps chart an island that "has been the exoticized/eroticized object of imperial ambition" ("Exoticism and Ethnicity" 123).
  15. For an extended analysis of the ways in which *Running in the Family* partakes of both fact and fiction, see Hutcheon. Also see, Press (64). For a general discussion of how Ondaatje pairs history and fiction, see Heble's "Michael Ondaatje and the Problem of History."
  16. When discussing Ondaatje's narrator's relation to the historical maps of Ceylon, Kamboureli argues that ambiguity and uncertainty is what saves the narrator

- "from losing himself [...] in the 'false maps' of Ceylon hung on his brother's wall in Toronto" (87). What I wish to suggest is that the enactment of a sociology of the map entails that the narrator does indeed lose himself in the map.
17. It is unfortunate, but quite telling for those interested in word and image relations, that the introductory map is not reproduced in the English translation of *Volkswagen Blues* by Sheila Fischman, especially if one considers Roy's analysis of how the visual material found in travel narratives influences reading. The images are a way of "testing [her] second, third, and fourth impressions" and, more importantly for what concerns us here, mirror the thematic issues played out in the narrative in "sometimes contradictory and sometimes complementary ways" (5). See Paterson for an examination of how La Grande Sauterelle questions the official history presented in maps (607).
  18. Unlike Leahy, I do not see the symbolic erasure of cultural difference as surpassing "the limits of credibility" (76).
  19. A number of colonial and postcolonial theorists have examined mapping as a powerful weapon of colonial enterprises. Aschcroft forcefully argues that cartography partakes in a powerful European discourse that naturalized a particular vision of the world (128-134). Similarly, Dirks argues that "[t]he world was shaped for Europe through cartography" (2). Harley comes to a similar conclusion. He specifies, "Boundary lines on the map were a medium of appropriation which those unlearned in geometrical survey methods found impossible to challenge" ("Maps, Knowledge, and Power" 285).
  20. For a critical reading of Ondaatje's narrative gesture toward historical recuperation as an exploitation of the exotic, see Kanaganayakam and Mukherjee. For a refutation of this reading, see Pesch.

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